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Creators	O'Kane, Paul

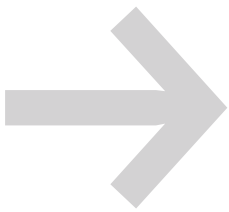
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First, a plaster figure, not a Madonna but a gymnast in a cream leotard and a matching mask. The dragon of the city, bronze and still fiery, the Disney-esque law courts, lists and lists of lawyers in the courts and yards, the Old Bank of England in which I don't belong, all that is new seems only surface, shop-fittings, all the old is substantial, of course, for it has lasted.



St Paul's keeps looming, a jaw-dropping enormity in ghostly stone, all the old and grand appears in monochromes of bronze and stone, the new is colourfully weak. Dr Johnson's house, it's too expensive to visit today, I must try to spend less every day (an axiom for every Londoner), 'The Cheshire Cheese'

public house in which Dickens sat and drank and thought and wrote perhaps, aaah! All the extraordinariness that I've forgotten ... a traffic island, an island in the sea of Ludgate circus ... something significant, but, it's gone ... small church interiors - St Clements' is draped around with morbid RAF flags, deathly, militarily, religious, at the altar a woman with her back turned shows as an incongruously vivid cerise skirt down to which falls a delta of thick black wiry hair. Standing, she talks or prays strangely loudly, and directly to the carved Christ as if he were the man she loved and lost. And as I exit the church's blown stone skin illuminated with coloured glass, a small brass plaque to the left sings, again incongruously 'oranges and lemons, say the bells of St Clements' (sung in a child's voice). Outside, I appreciate another island on which this church huddles amid the rush of cars.

Then at St Martin Ludgate's, a big rambling, bearded man who looks - as they say - 'homeless', jams on the grand piano, roughly representing memories of Bach perhaps. Against a back wall, you can find - again incongruously- fake loaves of bread arranged on a special shelf. Apparently this shelf once stood at the door on Sunday and the rich left bread in it for the poor - but the loaves here copy very modern types. You



can also see in here a pelican ripping blood and flesh from its own breast to feed its young; it is the martyr mother.

Missing and forgetting so much, picking out -for some reasons- these events and not every event, not other events. I am drawn up Ludgate Hill admiring again the magnificence of the Cathedral, St Paul's (which I've only begun to do very recently after 26 years of living and walking in London), noting the way Wren planted it on top of a significant hill (hills we barely notice until we start cycling the city) but also on a lovely axis, kicked around at an angle to face West in a way unlike any other building

nast mounted in that high window. Art is so popular - since the opening of Tate modern directly opposite the cathedral - that the bridge is teeming with amateur aesthetes glad to finally know where art is and also what it is all about. They squeeze around the woman in the lilac coat as if she is an island, a rock in their stream. Inspired by her calm devotion to looking, I stop and watch the river too, trying to see perhaps what she sees. There are gulls



and garbage flowing out of the city downstream to the estuary and the sea, and I'm reminded that the monochrome, olive brown river is an even greater historical substance than the bronzes and white

IN AND OUT OF THE CITY: A WALK FROM ALDWYCH TO MILLENNIUM BRIDGE VIA ST PAUL'S

TUESDAY 17TH
OCTOBER 2006



— by
Paul
O'Kane



become a huge cinema screen of white stone on which the orange and pink of failing sunlight plays.

Today, a breeze catches around the space cleared by the cathedral and I allow it to blow me around and beyond it to cross the river by Millennium Bridge. Here, a lady stands-out simply by sitting down on her own little portable stool which she has brought today, apparently to be able to watch the river through the bridge's aluminium bars. She wears a lilac coat which also stands out, perhaps as unfashionable or untimely. Is she mourning? If so why here and now when the bridge is filled with passing people? Has someone - a son perhaps - drowned? Is this a sad anniversary? This is no place for solitude (the bridge leads to Tate Modern, one of London's leading tourist attractions). Her turned back echoes that woman in St Clements, and also the little plaster gym-

stones that I'd witnessed earlier. I begin to play a kind of 'Paper, Scissors, Stone' game in which river-water or sunsets compete for supremacy against bronze and stone and flimsy shop fittings. The river is likely to win, until of course, the sun turns it to stone by evaporating its flow with a breath of fire, the sun is becoming a dragon. But today, the sun is hiding, leaving us grey and chilled. I feel a certain aging in a loss of my younger, constantly allegorical mind which used to burn-off paranoid poetics daily, filling notebooks with inspired images, back when everything seemed to mean too much



begun to mellow.

Today I'm able to reflect on my young self, as if I'm someone else now, as if I'm my own father and mother now looking down at the

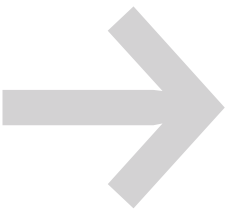
youth that I was looking up. Looking up I saw the little plaster figure, of a girl gymnast, like a little madonna but in a cream leotard and - incongruously- a matching cream mask. Why would you wear a mask to perform gymnastics? She appeared in a framing window cut deep in old stone and rounded Romanesque - perhaps this frame is what suggested the Madonna.

Perhaps she, and not the dragon at all is the real gateway to the city; for me at least, it was she who led me in despite the dragon. Why not? We choose our own entrances, our own gates are moments, and there are more, throughout the city, choices of what we wish to serve as a way. We give the city's places our own names, make places where there were none, and so, for me, this little plaster gymnast, high in an arched window, becomes the way in to the city today, just past the massive gateway to the high courts of justice (which, I have noticed, glow red like hell at night time). And the exit from the city? Another woman of



course, as in Kafka's stories where women always provide the connections from one event to another, from one space to another.

Or as in Nietzsche, who suggested that



truth might be a woman whom male philosophers have chased and seduced in vain. There was one woman, praying somehow profanely in a party-coloured skirt, but she had her back to me so I discount her as the possible exit from the city. So, that other woman then. Yes! The exit from the city lies across the river, but first you must pass through the strangely watching woman in the lilac coat, the one who never crosses herself but merely watches the river's own journey, in and out of the city like its eternal gurgling breath. The lady with the stool, who liked to stop where everyone was rushing, becoming herself an island, thereby turning everyone else into a river.

And perhaps it is wise for me to stop here too, to never pass beyond the woman in the lilac coat, to never leave the city, because, on the South side of the river everything is art, and there our own imagination is stolen from us by our admiration for the imaginations of others.



Paul O'Kane highlights and exploits failed or fading image technologies while celebrating images which, upon being made seem to discover that, though they have arrived their time perhaps has not. His work is not loyal to a particular medium and purposefully blurs its relation to 'the contemporary'. Working in film, photography and writing he explores time's impact on the value of the image. While uncomfortable pursuing prescribed rewards or expectations he is fascinated by the tension between the semi-conscious production of images and the self-conscious psychology of the 21st century artist. For this reason he sees the most rewarding way to progress is by looking back, as his work mines a personal archive of latent works and images made over 30 years. He has a keen interest in cities and recently completed a PhD titled 'A Hesitation Of Things'. Paul O'Kane also teaches in London art schools.

www.okpaul.com



All photographs by Paul O'Kane